

# WEST NILE VIRUS

## Reporting Dead Birds

### What is West Nile virus?

West Nile virus (WNV) is a mosquito-borne infection that can cause encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) or meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord).

### What role do birds play in the transmission of West Nile virus to people?

Mosquitoes become infected with West Nile virus by biting infected birds. Humans become infected when they are bitten by an infected mosquito.

### Why is it important to report dead birds?

Dead birds may provide an early indication of the appearance of West Nile virus in an area and may help to forecast the chances of people becoming infected.

### Where is West Nile virus found?

The first humans and birds with West Nile virus in the U.S. were found in downstate New York in 1999. Since then, the virus has spread throughout New York State and across the continental United States.

### What measures are now being taken to protect the public from West Nile virus?

The New York State Department of Health, in partnership with counties, New York City, other state and federal agencies, universities, and private organizations, has developed a comprehensive plan to reduce the risk of West Nile virus. The plan includes testing people, mosquitoes, dead birds, rabies-negative dead mammals and ill animals for the virus. Testing is available year-round, but is increased during mosquito season (spring through fall).

### How should I report any dead birds that I see?

Contact your county health department or the toll-free hotline, 1-866-537-BIRD (2473), during regular business hours. **Because crows are an especially good indicator of West Nile virus, it is critical to report all dead crows.** The reports themselves are vital information, used to help track the virus and determine where it may be most active.



### What information do I need to give when I report dead birds?

You should report the type of bird (if you know it), its location (including town, street, nearest cross street and ZIP code), and the date you saw it. You may be asked to leave your name and phone number so that the county can follow up in case the bird is needed for testing.

### What should I do with the dead bird until it is picked up for testing?

Each county health department has its own procedures for picking up dead birds for West Nile virus testing, and not all birds can be tested. If the bird cannot be reported or picked up right away, use a shovel or wear gloves to place it in a bag, and then put it in a refrigerator or ice chest that is not used for food. If that is not possible, place plastic bags of ice over the dead bird and cover it with a bucket.

### **What should I do if I'm told the dead bird does not require testing?**

If testing is not required, use a shovel or wear gloves to double-bag the bird, and dispose of it in the trash. Or bury it at least three feet deep, away from a stream or other water source.

### **Do I risk getting West Nile virus by handling a dead bird?**

There have been rare cases of WNV in persons whose occupations require them to handle live or dead birds, although mosquito-bite infection could not be ruled out in these cases. To eliminate any risk, barehanded contact with dead animals should always be avoided. Use a shovel or wear gloves when handling a dead animal.

### **How long does it take to test a dead bird for West Nile virus?**

The New York State Health Department tests birds according to geographical priority, not date received; therefore, it is not possible to provide timeframes.

### **Will I receive the test results of the bird(s) that I submit for testing?**

Due to the large number of test specimens, county health departments are not always able to provide specific test results to individuals submitting birds.

### **How will reports and test results be used?**

Dead bird reports and test results are used to guide prevention and control efforts. Summaries are available on the Department's Web site: <http://www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/westnile/index.htm>

### **If I see a lot of crows roosting, should I be concerned about West Nile virus?**

Crow roosts are natural phenomena in New York State. A large group of healthy, live crows is good news. Because crows are so sensitive to the disease, it probably indicates that West Nile virus is not a high risk in the area at that time. However, dead crows may indicate the presence of the virus and should be reported as soon as possible.

### **Are pet birds or poultry at risk for West Nile virus?**

Pet birds and poultry can become infected with West Nile virus.

### **Can an infected dead bird pose a risk to my pet?**

Pets occasionally get West Nile virus from mosquito bites, but very seldom get sick. Horses are more susceptible to serious illness from WNV than are dogs and cats. Natural infection of a pet by contacting or eating an infected dead bird has not been documented.

**TO REPORT A DEAD BIRD, CALL YOUR COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT, OR CALL:  
TOLL-FREE 1-866-537-BIRD (2473).**

